

THE EDUCATION
AND
CONVERSION
OF CHILDREN

Cornelia Lehn

Children in the Church

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Introduction

How do I bring the children I work with to Christ?
How can I help them experience conversion? What
is original sin? At what age are children lost if they
do not accept Christ? How can I impress on them
the necessity of making a decision? These are some
of the questions we church school teachers are asking,
for we know that Jesus wants us to bring little child-
ren to Him. To do so is our purpose in teaching; it is
the goal of all our efforts.

What the Bible Says

OLD TESTAMENT

When in doubt about some area of the Christian faith, the first step is, of course, to find out what the Bible says about it, so let us first see what is written about the education and conversion of children in the Old Testament.

Children were held very dear in the Hebrew community. They were considered very important. We need only think of the joy that Isaac must have brought to Abraham and Sara; the close ties between Joseph and his father Jacob; the love of Hannah for her little son Samuel.

God spoke very frequently to His people about the children in their midst. Through Moses He said, "... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:5-8). Apparently teaching children to know God was not to be a one-hour-a-week affair! And it was to be done by adults who themselves loved the Lord with their whole being.

Moses goes on to say, "When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?' Then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; . . . And the Lord commanded us to do these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he

might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us' " (Deut. 6:20-25).

It is interesting to note that the child was to be told about the history of his people and the great acts of God "when [he] asks you." Apparently the readiness of the child for the information was to be taken into consideration.

But education of children did not only take place informally at home. Moses tells the priests, "Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law" (Deut. 31:12).

The child was a part of the community of faith—he learned from infancy on what God expected of His people.

But how did a child become a part of the community, a member of the congregation of the people of God? When God made His covenant or agreement with Abraham, He promised to be God to him and to his descendants after him (Gen. 17:5) but asked no promise from Abraham in return except that all of Abraham's descendants should be circumcised to show that they belonged to God. That was the sign of the agreement God had made with Abraham.

Since no promise on the part of the people was involved, infants, of course, could be part of the agreement. Later, however, when God made His covenant or agreement with Moses, He already expected the people to respond to Him with a responsible commitment. They knew God better now. He had saved them from their slavery in Egypt. They loved Him. In response to God's love and care they promised to obey the laws He gave them (Ex. 24:7).

Even though the children were always a part of the congregation responding to God, little ones do not seem to have been held responsible for the agreement between God and Moses. When the people of Israel rebelled against the Lord on their way to the promised land, God swore, " . . . Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land which I swore to your fathers, except . . . and your children, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall go in there, and to them I will give it, and they shall possess it" (Deut. 1:34-39).

What then about conversion in the Old Testament? Was there such a thing? People could not be converted to Christ, of course, but they could and did make commitments to God. This kind of converting (turning) to God is mentioned many many times in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 17:13 we read, "Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments.'" In Amos God pleads with His people, "Seek me and live. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate" (5:4, 15). Always a turning to God involved concrete obedience to Him. Children are not mentioned specifically, and as noted previously, do not seem to have been held accountable when the people as such turned away from the Lord rather than to Him.

NEW TESTAMENT

What does the New Testament say about the education and conversion of children? The kingdom of God came and will come in the person of Jesus. What is the place of children in this Kingdom and how do they become citizens of it? It is obvious that children were present in the crowds of people coming to Jesus. In the account of the feeding of the five thousand we read "And those who ate were about five

thousand men besides women and children" (Mt. 14:21). The children heard what Jesus said. Then there is, of course, the little passage in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that we know so well. The Mark account reads, "And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them" (10:13-16).

Since this is the main story we have regarding Jesus and children, we should take a closer look at it for a better understanding of our own task. First of all, someone, possibly the parents, brought the children to Jesus. The reason given in Mark and in Luke is "that he might touch them." And He did. He took them in His arms. The Luther translation reads, "und er herzte sie," which translated, is "he pressed them to his heart." In Matthew the reason for bringing the children to Jesus is, "that he may lay his hands on them and pray." And this also He did in His blessing.

It does not say how old the children were, but Jesus apparently did not think they were too small to bother with or to bless. And He made a very startling statement: "... for to such belongs the kingdom of God." It bears reading again and again and is almost unbelievable. It does not say, "To the children, if or when they repent of their sins, will belong the kingdom of God," or "To the children, when they grow up, will belong the kingdom of God." It says very plainly in the present tense, without qualifications, and repeated in each of the three accounts exactly alike: To such belongs the kingdom of God. In the Luther translation it is even stronger: "... solcher ist das Reich Gottes." (The kingdom of God is theirs.)

As if that is not enough, in Mark, Jesus follows this statement with, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." So—we adults had better sit up and take notice. Jesus tells us that we must accept the great gift of the kingdom as children do or we just will not have it. Surprisingly he does not tell us that we must persuade children to receive the kingdom as an adult.

Jesus does not use the word "conversion" but He calls many people to follow Him, which is surely the same. In a long procession they pass through the Gospels: the twelve disciples first of all and then such people as Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, the woman at the well in Samaria, the man born blind, and the thief on the cross. To all people He called His invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden," "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me," "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus, however, made this very clear—it is not easy to follow Him. He warns, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." To one man who already wanted to follow Him He says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head." In Luke we hear Him saying to the crowds who came to hear Him, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (14:27).

All this sounds very much like a decision Jesus expects adults to make—not children.

Let us look at the conversions in Acts. Perhaps there we may find more help on the conversion of children. The first person we usually think of there is Paul. And

Cornelius. But again a long procession of people pass before our inward eye—people who made the great decision to follow Christ: the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia, the Philippian jailer—all adults. But in the case of the conversion of the jailer there is something of special interest to us. When the jailer asks Paul and Silas, "Men, what must I do to be saved?", they say, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And then the biblical account reads: "and they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family" (16:30-33). Come to think of it, was there not something mentioned in one of the Gospels about a whole family believing? Yes, in John 4:26-53 we read the story of the official in Capernaum whose son Jesus healed without coming to the house, and it says, " . . . he himself believed, and all his household."

In both of the above cases it could include children. But nowhere, it seems, does the New Testament mention one individual child having a conversion experience independently.

As in the Old Testament, the teaching of children is mentioned, but not very often. We know that Timothy had a godly mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5), so surely we may assume that they taught him the Old Testament stories. Then he heard about Christ from Paul and became a disciple. In Ephesians children are admonished to obey their parents and fathers are told to bring children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. But again, not a word about conversion.

What Others Say

We have, although of necessity very briefly, gone through the Bible to look for answers to our questions regarding the education and conversion of children. Now let us see how other people have understood the biblical account.

AUGUSTINE

Augustine, who lived between the years 357 and 430 developed a doctrine that all children are damned because of original sin. Original sin is the sinful nature which all human beings have inherited from Adam. The term "original sin" is not found in the New Testament but the idea is expressed in statements that Paul makes in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians. He says in Romans 5:12, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned," and in Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

Augustine believed that after Adam disobeyed God all his descendants became completely depraved or bad and could not do any good at all. To him this meant that all children were lost unless they were baptized. Baptism to him was not a symbol of salvation; it was a sacrament through which God actually saved the infant from damnation. It became very important, therefore, that all infants were immediately baptized. Since it was believed, however, that the child was safe after baptism the church became more and more lax in teaching the children about Christ and the necessity of a personal commitment to Him.

THE ANABAPTISTS

This was the state of affairs when men like Georg Blaurock, Felix Manz, Pilgrim Marpeck and Menno Simons, who were later known as Anabaptists, started reading the Bible very carefully. More and more they became convinced that the baptism of infants was meaningless. Pilgrim Marpeck wrote, "After Peter had admonished the people they grew anxious in heart and asked, What shall we do? Be converted, he replied, be sorry for your sins and let each one be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sin, and thus you shall receive the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Because the children who cannot talk are still unknowing and cannot be converted and have also not yet been perverted by their own carnal reason, they cannot receive any forgiveness of their sins in baptism, because they do not have any knowledge or guilt concerning their sins, either before God or in themselves. Therefore the baptism of infants is a mere mockery before God." ("Pilgrim Marpeck," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, Volume III, p. 495.)

The Anabaptists found the belief that children were damned because of sin inherited from Adam and lost if not baptized completely inconceivable when compared with what they read in the Bible. Why, Jesus had said that the Kingdom of Heaven was theirs! And had not Christ died for everyone? Surely that included the children until they could either reject or consciously accept the atoning work of Christ. They believed that children, grown to adulthood, must have the right to make a personal decision either for or against Christ.

The Anabaptists believed this so strongly that they refused to baptize their children, knowing full well that it might cost them their life. For very many it did. Countless mothers and fathers were beheaded, burnt at the stake, and drowned for refusing to baptize their children.

What Do We Believe?

But what does all this have to do with conversion? We do not believe in infant baptism. But do we or don't we believe that children are lost if not converted?

Many people do not believe in infant baptism but strongly believe that little children should be converted as soon as possible or they are eternally damned just like adults. There is no difference. As Gideon G. Yoder describes in his book, The Nurture and Evangelism of Children, the Puritans impressed on their children the awful consequence of their sin and their need for conversion. Jonathan Edwards called children vipers and assumed they were "out of Christ" unless converted. Many revivalists have taken this same stand and have worked very hard to impress on children their lost condition in order to "save" them (pp. 19-21).

Anabaptists said children were covered by the atoning work of Christ but stressed the absolute necessity of a conscious decision for Christ once the age of responsibility or accountability had been reached.

Here is the crux of the matter. When does a child reach the age of accountability? Can it not come very early in life? Even before a child goes to school? Children have been known to be very conscious of sin and to have made very sincere and lasting decisions for Christ.

There can be no doubt that children are conscious of wrong-doing. Anybody who has worked with children knows that. Child psychologists say that even pre-school children may be so convinced of their badness that they are totally crushed. Their concept of what is right or wrong is at this time, however, depend-

ent on what their parents have told them is right or wrong. If a child is taught, for instance, that fighting for his rights is wrong, he will feel great guilt for knocking someone down on the playground; if he is taught that he is a sissy if he does not fight, he could feel guilty of cowardice if he fails to defend himself.

Many adults know, however, from their own conversion experiences that there came a time in their lives when they reached a crossroad where they needed to decide, not for or against a certain activity, but whether they would follow Christ in a life of discipleship or go in the opposite direction and follow their own will. It had to do with a basic direction: facing toward God or walking away from Him.

Perhaps it will help us to look again at Jesus' story of the prodigal son. Is this not the greatest conversion story ever told? Surely as a child this son was often naughty and in need of forgiveness. His father didn't think of throwing him out of the house because of this. But one day the boy decided to leave his father's house. This was very different from just disobeying his father. He made a decision to reject the safety of his home. Later he made a conscious decision to return.

Is this not a picture of the difference between sinning and being a sinner? Is this not what the Anabaptists meant when they said a child was safe and covered by the atoning blood of Christ until he could make a responsible decision to either reject or accept salvation? Does this story not say to us that our children can be bad and yet be safe in the kingdom of God until at the age of accountability?

But there we are again—when is the age of accountability?

Reams have been written about it and what all writers seem to agree on is that no one but the Holy Spirit knows. Always, God is the one who calls, and on the level of his own maturity it is the human being who responds.

Our Task

What then is our task as Sunday school teachers? If children are safe, why bother teaching them that they are sinners and in need of salvation? If we do not know the age of accountability, how do we know when to counsel them to accept Christ? What is our responsibility to the children in our midst? What is our commission from Christ?

When we think of Jesus taking the children in His arms and loving them, is He not saying by His actions and by His words that children are children in their own right and not just future adults? Perhaps we church school teachers tend to look at our task as mainly preparing the children for their Christian life in the future—we think they must learn many things so that in the future they will make a decision for Christ and become strong Christians.

But children are living their life right now. They have mental, emotional, and spiritual needs that must be met. God has given them active minds. They have many questions—they want to know about God and about death and about life. God has given them a longing to be loved and understood. If they do not receive love and understanding they wilt and some even die like plants without sun and rain. God has given them a conscience so that they are greatly bothered when they have done wrong. They need to experience forgiveness and to forgive others.

Are we challenging their active minds so that they may know the excitement of learning? Are we making available to them the record of the great acts of God in such a way that they may experience His loving care in the present? When they are with us do they feel the gladness a life with Christ brings? Do they sense the meaning of love and understanding and

forgiveness? Jesus loved and blessed them. He had time for them. This, surely, is also our task.

Another thing that stands out very clearly as we look at the biblical record is that God has always admonished His people to teach their children what He has done in the past, how He has revealed Himself, so that they may be strongly rooted in this heritage and find their identity as citizens of the kingdom of God. A strong tree has deep roots. A plant may sprout in shallow or poor soil but it does not grow into a healthy plant; it cannot bear much fruit. And so it seems to me that a major part of our commission from Christ is to prepare the soil in the hearts of children so that the seed sown will have good rootage and that boys and girls will grow up into strong men and women of God who will again be able to be and teach the Good News to others, and who will be willing even to die for their faith if need be.

But does our search not also yield something on the subject of conversion? It is very clear from the New Testament as well as from the Old that people need to make a decision or decisions for or against God, for or against good; they need to commit themselves definitely, counting the cost, if they want to follow Christ and be a member of the kingdom of heaven. All we have read indicates that God does not expect children to make this decision before they are ready for it. He knows, since He himself has planned human beings that way and has put laws of growth into them, that children's minds and souls and bodies develop as a unit, not as separate entities. A child cannot run in the Olympics until he is physically mature enough to compete; he cannot obtain a Ph.D degree or make a decision about his professional life until he has accumulated a great deal of information; he cannot make an adult decision about his spiritual life until he has been able to count the cost and can in gratitude respond to God's love.

But during the whole course of his development a

child can run at his own pace, he can gather information and make some decisions, he can reach out to God and love Him. In fact, he can make a very sincere and genuine decision to follow Christ. But it is a child's decision. It will help him to reach the place where he can make an adult decision for which the church will hold him responsible.

So it seems that throughout the span of childhood and adolescence we teachers need to be very sensitive to a child's spiritual needs and thoughts. We need to listen carefully to him and keep the channels of communication open. All along the way he will have questions about God, all along the way he will need to make some moral decisions, all along the way he will need to make spiritual commitments on the level of his own maturity, and woe to us if at those times we are too busy teaching "the lesson" to realize the moment of decision.

John H. Neufeld says in A Study Paper on the Meaning of Conversion, "Children and young people who have made a number of smaller decisions earlier in life and then follow through with a master commitment in adolescence will probably feel hard pressed to say 'when' they were converted. Some of us cannot give a time and place when we 'turned' to the Lord. However, we are underway with Christ today" (p. 16).

But what about that master commitment? Is there only one? Some people say they experienced an adult conversion and yet later on in life they more than once came up against the need to make additional radical decisions—almost as if they were challenged to take a step up to a higher level of spiritual maturity. It makes you think of the Apostle Peter. When did he make his master commitment? At the time when he decided to leave his fishing and follow Christ? At the time when he uttered those great words, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16)? Or was it after his denial when

Christ confronted him with the question, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (Jn. 21:16)? They were all great milestones in Peter's spiritual life. Can it be that we too may need to make more than one adult decision?

Conclusion

We have asked some questions. We have done some searching. We have tried to come to some conclusions. This little study of the education and conversion of children from the standpoint of a church school teacher has been helpful to me because it has been the occasion to inquire more diligently into the biblical record for a specific purpose and to read good and more detailed books and papers on the subject written by others. They are listed in the bibliography.

Let us be alert to the Holy Spirit, sensitive to the children we teach, and always in close touch with the Master we follow so that we and the children He has given us may walk in and toward the Light.

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